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AUTHOR Broderick, W. F.
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ABSTRACT

By exposing the encroachments of the technological, highly centralized state on the individual, by discussing the struggle in the universities between authority and dissent, and by exploring the problems of an "air-conditioned," dehumanized world, teachers can bring new meaning to the study of "1984"--a novel which seems little more than a distressing piece of science fiction when viewed by politically ignorant students. The Orwellian vision of this struggle between life-denying groups and humanists provides a healthy point of departure for student inquiry into the nature of those problems and may point to possible solutions. (MF)

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1984 — Is It Worth Reading?

By W. F. Broderick
English Department, Teachers' College, Ballarat

Students have come to me after having read *1984* and said: "What's all the fuss about? I can't see anything in it. Is it anything more than a depressing piece of science fiction?"

And this failure by students to come to grips with the meaning of *1984* throws a revealing light on their ignorance of the great political issues of this century. A mind that has no concept of Fascism, Communism, the mass media, democratic theory, liberalism, will indeed find *1984* a meaningless map of hell. *1984* is not for the unintelligent or the ignorant. It makes its greatest appeal to the reader who has studied political science or history or sociology or social psychology. Few of our students have the necessary background to respond imaginatively to the concepts presented by Orwell. Australian students are by nature optimists. In their eyes the whole contemporary European tradition of pessimism represented by writers such as Aldous Huxley, Grahame Green, T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats is largely incomprehensible. They have the healthy extrovert's scepticism towards prophecies of doom. In the bright Australian sunshine, European Cassandras seem to shrink and disappear. It is difficult to make our senior pupils believe that they would behave like the boys in *Lord of the Flies* or that *The Hidden Persuaders* has any relevance to life as it is lived in Australia. Willie Loman might well be a valid symbol of the plight of Everyman in the U.S., but *Death of a Salesman* to the youngsters in forms V and VI is death of an *American* salesman. It simply couldn't happen here.

How then can we make the *1984* seem a relevant social comment to young Australians?

One way is to examine the struggle currently being waged in the universities and elsewhere between authority and dissent. The anti-conscription movement or the anti-Vietnam War campaign will raise questions that lead straight into Orwell country. Is the State entitled to compel its citizens to serve in a war that is against their conscience? How far can the State go in its intervention in the life of the individual? Is the State acting within its rights in listening in on private conversations, or intercepting mail, or keeping dossiers on people who hold anti-establishment views? Under what conditions may a democratic government refuse to answer questions about its security services? When does censorship become a denial of liberty?

All of these questions are no longer academic in this country. In the past two or three years there have been the Zarb case, the White case, the Hoffman affair, the Michaelis-dossier affair, student riots, the refusal of visas to scholars to go overseas and of rights to travel in certain parts of Australia, 'phone tapping, bugging of private homes and censorship of books and films.

Having thus shown the relevance of these questions to present-day Australia we could move on to asking our students what it is that Orwell is saying.

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Put briefly, Orwell's novel is concerned with the debasement of individual life by the growth of the omnipotent State. In Orwell's eyes, all systems are at war with individuals and "systems" in Orwell's sense include governments, churches, political parties, institutions, clubs, teams, committees. He is at one with Tolstoy in his detestation of power groups, and would agree with Shaw that all professions are conspiracies against the laity. A group is a pack of animals dedicated to preying on other animals. The bigger the pack, the more dangerous it is to individual freedom. Orwell would agree heartily with Rousseau that "the more a State expands the more liberty diminishes". Orwell's ideal state would probably resemble the ones described by Aldous Huxley in *Ends and Means* — states in which power is diluted by the creation of fragmented and decentralized political systems. But Orwell is realistic enough to realize that the whole trend of modern society is in the opposite direction. In point of fact, the most significant fact in political life today is the increasing centralization and extension of the powers of the state. Local government is growing weaker, and individuals have come to feel so alienated from the power system that they have opted out of it like the flower people or banged their heads against it like the dissident student groups. Almost every new invention strengthens the hand of the State against heretics, and provides the means to keep them impotent. The waves of student rebellions around the world have all battered themselves impotently against the citadels of centralized power. Riot control technology and riot control gases will make tomorrow's rebellions even more abortive than yesterday's.

Orwell's thesis then resembles the Christian one in that he asserts the right of the individual to lead a life of his own choosing. His book is one of the most powerful cases ever put forward in this or any other century against the totalitarian State, whether of the right, left, or centre. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. *1984* is a picture of absolute corruption. As O'Brien says to Winston Smith: "The espionage, the betrayals, the tortures, the executions, the disappearances will never cease. It will be a world of terror as much as a world of triumph. The more the Party is powerful, the less it will be tolerant: the weaker the opposition, the tighter the despotism".

1984 is not fifteen years away. It may be seen in a dozen countries at this very moment exercising powers not very different from those of the Inner Party in Oceania. Winston Smith would find himself in familiar surroundings today in China, Russia, Czechoslovakia, some of the African Republics and in many of the South American states. *1984* lies all around us.

At home, the signs are more subtle, but they are nevertheless significant. Creeping bureaucracy is making great inroads on private freedom and private property. And the people behind the growth of the new leviathan are not Communists or Socialists or Fascists. There is no sinister conspiracy, no villain in the dramatic sense. The people who are to blame, if blame there be, are the man in the street who wants more creature-comforts, the businessman who wants more profits, the technocrat who wants more efficiency, the planner who wants an end to chaos, the politician who wants us to compete more successfully overseas.

Modern man faced with a large hungry family has called in technology to help him. The price to be paid for feeding the teeming millions in today's world is a high one. Technology, Progress, the Great Society, the Five-Year Plan and the Great Leap Forward give with one hand and take away with the other. They give, or promise to give, security and a reason-

able standard of living. In return they demand the surrender of certain "luxuries": privacy, family autonomy, ownership of a small business, control of certain State agencies (such as defence and security), participatory democracy.

Increasingly the technological state will move closer and closer to a totalitarian form. It won't matter in the end whether a state begins as democratic, Fascist or Communist. All will end as totalitarian states, because only a highly-organized, all-pervasive authoritarian state will be able to hold together and feed the teeming millions that will make up the nations of tomorrow's world. The states that began as democracies will still talk of liberty, consent and popular suffrage. The forms of democracy will still be there but with the mass media firmly in the hands of the central government, the public will have no access to independent news or views. States that began as Communist republics will talk of equality and economic freedom, but again the reality will be something different.

So the society into which our youngsters will enter will be the Orwell world of *1984* — without the poverty. Whatever else it mars, the scientific technological society of tomorrow will certainly cure poverty. Then, and then only, will we come to understand Christ's words: "Not by bread alone doth man live".

We will have plenty to eat — provided that the development of food getting can keep one jump ahead of the population explosion. If there is a failure in the realm of creative science than *1984* may well come to pass.

Tocqueville writing a hundred years earlier saw more clearly than Orwell the dangers of the mass society of the future: "Above the milling crowds stands an immense and tutelary power which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications and to watch over their fate. That power is absolute, provident and mild. When such a government becomes omnipotent what remains but to spare people all the care of thinking and all the trouble of living".

Instead then, of a poverty-stricken world of warring super-powers, it is more likely that the future will be what Henry Miller calls "an air-conditioned nightmare".

It would be an instructive exercise to ask our students to list the problems of such an air-conditioned, dehumanized world. Some of these would be the joylessness of automated work, alienation from the centres of decision-making, the degradation of public discussion, the proliferation of time-killing amusements, and a loss of any belief that would give meaning to a mechanized existence. Huxley in *Brave New World* showed us in the twenties what life could be like in the technological societies of the future. His hero, who seems to have missed out on some vital section of his conditioning, chose to leave the "civilized" world and enter the reservation wherein the old disease-ridden, poverty-stricken life was still lived. But for our students and for their students after them no such choices will be available. Our job as "teachers" of *1984* is to give them an insight into the nature of the problems that will confront them and to get them thinking about ways of coping with them.

Orwell's vision is a healthy one for young people to examine. He is against oppressive group systems and hate-making agencies. He is for the individual and against abstractions that separate people and nations. Like Ibsen in *The Wild Duck* he warns against "single-principle" fanatics and ideologies that elevate themselves above human beings. Unlike Grahame

Greene's *Quiet American* he doesn't see a dead soldier as a martyr for democracy but as a victim of the hatreds between power groups. In simplified terms, Orwell sees life as a struggle between those who see people as ends in themselves and those who see them as means to some other end. Life is a struggle between life-denying groups (Hard-line Communists, Capitalists, segregationists, exclusivists of any kind, extremists) who work from "principles" and dogma, like O'Brien, and those who work through love, like Julia and Winston Smith. In a time of hysterical ideologies no message could be healthier.

If we bring our students to explore some of these issues Orwell's book will not be a confused piece of science fiction but a map of a better way of living. The real struggle today is not between blacks and whites, Communists and anti-Communists, good guys and bad guys. It is a struggle between those who would create a desert and call it some abstract name like Communism, Private Enterprise or the State, and those who would say that human life is the most sacred thing in the world and that it cannot serve anything but itself.

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